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SUBJECT: FRENCH MFA ON MIDEAST PEACE ISSUES AT THE JULY 13
PARIS SUMMIT ON THE MEDITERRANEAN

REF: PARIS 1318 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew Young for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) During a July 9 discussion of the pending Libyan draft UNSCR on Israeli settlements, French MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Patrice Paoli observed that the impasse over the UNSCR underscored how such short-term annoyances took away from the relatively good prospects for peace over the longer term. This led him to ruminate on how hard-pressed moderates were on the Arab side in general and among Palestinian leaders in particular given Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement in the occupied territories and continued settlement activity. Paoli argued that France needed to use Israeli PM Olmert's visit to Paris for the July 13 summit on the Mediterranean and the USG needed to use Israeli Defense Minister Barak's upcoming visit to Washington to urge the Israelis to live up to their commitments under the Roadmap.

¶2. (C) As he hammered home the need for Israel to improve the situation in a way that helped President Abbas and PM Fayyad, Paoli said that France, as current president of the EU, is hearing from other members that the EU needs to go further to change the situation between Israel and the Palestinians. He cited impatience and frustration at the level of EU external affairs commissioner Benita Ferrero-Walder as well as Quartet special envoy Tony Blair. For France, President Sarkozy had staked out a forceful public position in his speech to the Israeli Knesset on the need for Israel to change policy with respect to settlements and restrictions on Palestinian movement. Paoli noted that French efforts to encourage Arab donors to make good on their pledges of assistance to the Palestinian Authority last December are partly complicated by things like the wrangling in New York over UNSCR on Israeli settlements. Without question, that debate has arrived at the worst possible moment in terms of the July 13 Paris summit, mounting EU pressure on France to do more as EU president on the Middle East, and Sarkozy's need to make good on his own credibility after his Knesset speech.

¶3. (C) Paoli then affirmed that what France and the EU want is a more "supple" Quartet that could respond to the immediate needs in the region. He said the EU would meet soon in Brussels to discuss this concept and to follow up its declared readiness to intervene to provide reassurances/guarantees to the parties if and as appropriate to ensure forward momentum. Without being more specific on this vague concept, Paoli emphasized that the EU sees itself as providing active support but not to get involved as a player that would distract from the Annapolis process. As we sought to understand better how the EU would not risk exactly that outcome, DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille referred to negotiations on security arrangements General Jones is leading for the Quartet and stated that France wants to work out how the EU can share in providing external

support to those arrangements.

¶4. (C) We noted questions in Washington about French plans for a trilateral Sarkozy/Olmert/Abbas meeting on the margins of the July 13 summit. As with Lebanon/Syria, we above all else want to avoid unpleasant surprises. Paoli replied that the summit is not intended to achieve political ends beyond launching the Union for the Mediterranean. He said this was actually one of the points demanded by Arab summit participants. Nevertheless, "certain people will be present," and France wants to capitalize at least on the symbolic aspects of their presence. There will be no "forced meetings," and Paoli claimed that even the trilateral meeting cited would mostly be to offer "workshop space" to Olmert and Abbas if they wanted to so avail themselves. Indeed, this was the overriding premise to all the activities on the margins of the summit, including between Syria and Lebanon or Syria and Israel (with the Turks present to continue to play their facilitative role in the latter indirect dialogue). Paoli stressed that France had no formal, concrete objectives to set out since doing so would risk embarrassing failure. The main focus, he reiterated, was the Union for the Mediterranean and its projects.

¶5. (C) Comment: Exactly what vision the French have for a more dynamic role in the Middle East as president of the EU will likely only solidify and become clearer after the July 13 summit. We already have tentative appointments at the MFA and the French presidency set up for July 15 to obtain readouts. For now, however, French thinking strikes us as a bit improvisational and imperfectly coordinated among policymakers at the MFA and the French presidency. Recent

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embassy reporting, in cables and Paris Points, has revealed that the Quai and the Elysee do not necessarily see things eye-to-eye, with the Quai (and Kouchner) continuing to argue for a more assertive French/EU role and the Elysee preferring not to undermine Washington's lead but preserving Sarkozy's ability to capitalize on any unexpected "breakthroughs" this weekend. The best official -- and somewhat vague -- indication of what the French are thinking came during a July 8 exchange between reporters and the MFA spokesperson at the daily press briefing:

Begin text of official English translation:

Q: President Bashir al-Asad said in a major national daily this morning that he wanted a direct role for France in the Middle East peace process. Is that going to encourage France to move forward with a new initiative and the stimulus of the EU presidency?

A: France, in the context of the EU presidency, thinks there is a need for a stronger role for Europe in the region. There's a period between the end of the current administration and the arrival of a new administration in the United States, and that probably gives Europe more responsibility in this period of transition.

Q: Had the Syrian president asked France to play a role in the direct negotiations between his country and Israel?

A: We are letting the meetings of the heads of state take place before saying what the French response will be.

Q: The Syrians, Palestinians, the Arab countries, and France all want a French role, but, after Mr. Sarkozy's speech to the Knesset, is Israel going to agree to this French role, this European role?

A: It's a French and European role. Prime Minister Olmert will be in Paris in a few days, and we'll be discussing it with him then. But I don't see why, especially in the context of the president's visit to Israel, why we would see the contrary. Moreover, the Israeli authorities have

encouraged France and Europe to take initiatives in the region.

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